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FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFATT

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SUBJECT: TRIBAL LEADER HAMID AL-AHMAR STIRS UP YEMENI POLITICS

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. De facto head of Yemen's most powerful tribal confederation Hamid al-Ahmar made his boldest political move to date in an August 5 al-Jazeera interview, blaming President Saleh for the country's woes and calling for him to resign. Yemen's political elite has largely welcomed Ahmar's candor, but is wary of the personal ambitions that inspire his open criticism of Yemen's ruler of 31 years. Due to his powerful tribal ties, Ahmar possesses a rare ability) and now willingness) to speak his mind about Yemen's most sensitive political issues that the rest of Yemeni society still lacks. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In an August 5 interview on al-Jazeera's popular "Bila Hudud" (Without Borders) program, Islah Member of Parliament, powerful businessman and de facto leader of Yemen's largest tribal confederation Hamid al-Ahmar attributed the country's many problems to President Saleh and called on the president to resign. Ahmar, the most influential son of deceased Speaker of Parliament and opposition Islah party founder Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, addressed a range of issues from the Southern Movement and Houthi conflict to the Saleh family and corruption. Ahmar spoke with extraordinary candor, saying that Yemen is "on the verge of total collapse." He also said that the President's appointment of his relatives in key ROYG positions was a "treasonable offense." Ahmar said a southerner should be elected as Yemen's next president and suggested Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) Secretary General Dr. Yassin Sayyid Noman as a good candidate.

¶3. (C) Ahmar's unusually candid comments generated a flurry of attention from the ROYG, local media and the Yemeni political elite. Yemeni journalist Mohammed al-Qadhi, Reuters and al-Bayan correspondent Mohammed al-Ghabari and Ahmed al-Haj of the Associated Press said Ahmar's comments were widely consumed and positively received by the general public. Qadhi told Pol/E FSN on August 9, "The majority of ordinary people applauded Hamid, and said it was the first time that someone has made such straightforward and direct comments about Saleh and his regime." Ahmar, who is currently involved in the JMP's National Dialogue process, also seemed to be paving the way for the impending release of the JMP's National Salvation Plan, billed as a comprehensive reform program to cure the nation's ills. Ahmar told the Ambassador on July 26 that the JMP wants to position itself as a "real alternative" to the ruling General People's Congress (GPC).

¶4. (C) The political elite in Sana'a and Aden, however, has reacted with greater skepticism regarding Ahmar's motives. Former presidential advisor Mohammed Salim Basenduah told the Ambassador on August 11 that, while Hamid's comments will start widespread discussion about the idea of Saleh resigning, the Yemeni people won't accept Ahmar as their next leader. Editor-in-Chief of independent Aden-based newspaper al-Ayyam Hisham Bashraheel told PolOffs on August 9 that the interview was a maneuver to gain support from the disaffected interest groups beset by the various crises across Yemen. Bashraheel, however, admitted that Ahmar's comments on the "southern issue" and the President's monopolization of power were spot-on. Southern Movement leader General Mohammed Saleh Tammah told PolOff on August 9 that the movement supported Ahmar's views that Saleh must step down, but

believes that even this bold change would not be enough to preserve the unity of Yemen. Lawyers Mohammed al-Saqqaf and Shada Nasser told PolOffs on August 10 that Hamid is positioning himself as a future leader of Yemen.

¶5. (C) The ROYG acted quickly in an attempt to quash any positive play that Ahmar's comments were getting, releasing statements criticizing "ambitious" members of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) without mentioning specific names. Foreign Minister Abubakr al-Qirbi told the Ambassador on August 8 that the opposition parties need to be a "part of the solution" and said that the ROYG was open to debate any issues under consideration. Any other actions, however, including releasing political prisoners or continuing demonstrations in the southern governorates, will lead to greater deterioration of the state, Qirbi said.

¶6. (U) The official press condemned the interview, while independent media largely covered it without commentary, Islah media outlets being the exception. Bloggers, meanwhile, felt more free than usual to praise Ahmar's speech without fear of government reprisal. Some hailed Ahmar as Yemen's next president. Official government daily al-Gomhuriya published an editorial reminding Hamid al-Ahmar that his father, the late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, openly supported President Saleh in the 2006 presidential elections.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) While Hamid al-Ahmar claims to harbor no ambition to rule Yemen) and indeed, publicly suggests that others are more qualified for the task) his bold comments on al-Jazeera have tongues wagging about his real agenda. Regardless of how that plays out, he has very cleverly used his privileged positions as standard-bearer of his father's political legacy, and de facto leader of the powerful Hashid tribal confederation, to literally re-define the nature of the political debate in Yemen. The weeks to come will reveal if Ahmar's challenge to Saleh's rule will continue to resonate, emboldening others to dare to suggest a similar course of action. END COMMENT.

SECHE